

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : בשלח

1. Through the Ten Plagues that HaShem brought upon them, Par'o, the king of Egypt, together with his people, had at last learned to accept that HaShem is the True G-d and Master of All and that His orders are to be obeyed. At last, Par'o had given his permission for us to leave his country. On the morning following the Tenth Plague, the Smiting of the Firstborn, we assembled at Ramses (possibly the site of the later Heliopolis, or Pelusium) and journeyed to Sukkos (possibly Tjeku, or Sekhut, today's village of Naville, situated along today's Gulf of Suez) a distance of just over a hundred miles from Ramses and from there we proceeded out of Egypt in ordered groups, arranged according to our Tribes. Travelling with us was a vast number of non-Hebrews who joined us, and it was because of this great mixed multitude whose feelings towards us were not too clear, that we took with us weapons and arms on our way out from Egypt. Besides that, we also knew that we were on our way to take possession of the land of Kenaan, which HaShem had promised to our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, and we were prepared to do battle with the unlawful settlers of the land if they should put up a struggle.

2. By a pillar of cloud at day and a pillar of fire at night, HaShem led us on a circuitous route out of Egypt, and, obeying His command, we came to the Reed Sea on the edge of the wilderness, but facing towards Egypt, near the idol Typhon, the Egyptian god of the north. Unknown to us at the time, HaShem had ordered us to encamp just there so that the Egyptians should be misled into thinking that this, their god of the wilderness, had confounded us, and they would give chase in a renewed bout of defiance of HaShem (and also to retrieve their precious possessions which we had asked from them before we had left) for it was HaShem's plan that they were to serve as yet a further object lesson of what happens if one dares to defy the command of HaShem. When our movements were reported back to Par'o, he indeed changed his mind and, persuading his people to join him, they gave chase. When we saw the Egyptian hosts approaching and closing in on all sides, with nothing but the Reed Sea ahead of us, we cried out to HaShem. In reply, HaShem told Mosheh to give the order to travel forward — towards the sea. At the same time, the pillar of cloud, which had been ahead of us, moved back and positioned itself between us and the Egyptians so that they could not reach us, and a mighty wind started to blow.

3. Trusting in HaShem that somehow or other He would help us, we journeyed on — into the sea. Then HaShem gave Mosheh the order to raise his staff, and the waters of the sea started to part. The wind continued to blow, drying out the seabed. As we all walked through on the dry land of the seabed to the seashore, the Egyptians rushed

after us in hot pursuit, their feelings of vengeance making them blind to the danger they were plunging into. But as we reached the shore, the seabed behind us was transformed by the pillar of fire with the pillar of cloud from dry land into hot, sticky mud. A terrible panic gripped the Egyptians as they struggled with frantic horses and chariots that had had their wheels wrenched off, unable to move forward or to retreat. Then HaShem gave Mosheh the order to raise his hand once more over the sea and in the most fearsome fury, the waters of the sea, which had been piling up, came crashing down upon the trapped Egyptians, drowning them all, to a man, and then casting them out dead, on the sea shore. When we see how HaShem has saved us from our unrelenting enemy in such a miraculous way, and especially how the mighty Egyptian army with its fearsome cavalry — which was dreaded by all — was so utterly destroyed by HaShem in one fell swoop, we then see clearly the Almighty Power of HaShem. Awed at the great power we saw, we are at the same time thankful to HaShem for our deliverance by Him from the terrible vengeance of the Egyptians, and Mosheh leads us in proclaiming the greatness and might of HaShem in the Song of the Sea. Witnessing the Almightyness of HaShem at such close quarters as we did, and seeing the stupendous Power of HaShem, at that time we learned to fear Him forever. For what we experienced at the Reed Sea passed into our national conscience, it became a part of the Jewish psyche, and this, our fear of HaShem, will always remain a part of us.

4. After the miracles at the Reed Sea, Mosheh led us away from the seashore into the Wilderness of Shure, but after three days' journey our waterskins were empty and now we could find no water. We came to Morroh, where there was water, but the water there was undrinkable until HaShem showed Mosheh how to cure the water, and we stayed at Morroh for some days. It was while we were at Morroh that Mosheh our Teacher instructed us concerning some of the Mitzvos that we were going to be given when we were to receive the Torah of HaShem at Sinai.
5. On the fifteenth day of the second Month (that is, Iyyar) we arrived at the Wilderness of Sinn. Till this time, we had been eating what remained of the Matzoh dough of the Pessach Seder we had celebrated in Egypt, but now that was finished, and with the prospect of starvation in the Wilderness facing us, we clamoured for bread. HaShem told Mosheh that He would rain down to us bread from Heaven for every day, and for the next forty years we lived on this miraculous food — the Monn.
6. Mosheh our Teacher gives us instructions about the Monn: We are to collect each day's requirements every morning. We are not to leave any over until the next morning — any leftovers will become wormy and will spoil. This way we are to learn to place our trust in HaShem not only for his wondrous and fearsome epic miracles, but also for our daily sustenance, too. On Shabbos (and Yom Tov) however, there will fall no Monn: instead, on Friday (and on Erev Yom Tov) a double portion is to be collected — and it will not spoil. (To commemorate this, to this day we have two Challos at each of the Shabbos and Yom Tov meals.) For on Shabbos, says HaShem, we are not to concern ourselves about providing ourselves with our physical or material needs, but we are to utilize this holy day for higher things and thus sanctify ourselves by coming closer to

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HaShem through our spiritual endeavours. (But some people went out to look for Monn to fetch back to the camp on Shabbos, and they found none. HaShem was angry that they did not obey His command to keep the Shabbos holy.)

7. On HaShem's instructions, Mosheh tells Aharon to preserve a flask of Monn so that in later generations the Jewish People should see how it is HaShem Who provides for our needs and that our efforts to earn a livelihood should never occupy us so much that we neglect our spiritual progress, the study of HaShem's Torah and the observance of His Mitzvos. The Monn was to teach us for all time that despite our own efforts, it is really HaShem Who is the Provider of our needs, just as clearly as He showed us then when we were in the Wilderness for forty years and we had nothing else to rely on but the Monn.
8. With the pillar of cloud to show the way that HaShem wanted us to go, we continued on our travels, and we encamped at Refiddim. When we called out for water (for the waterskins were again empty) HaShem commanded Mosheh to take his staff and to smite the rock that He showed him. Mosheh does so and water gushes out in plentiful torrents. (This rock then became the Well which miraculously travelled with us on our journeys and supplied all the water needs of the whole Camp of the Children of Israel for all their time in the Wilderness.)
9. It was at this time that the warlike people Ammolayk attacked the Hebrew People. Until then, because of the wonders that HaShem did for us in Egypt and at the Reed Sea, anyone who heard of us was afraid: it seemed that the Hebrew People were invincible. But then the people of Ammolayk dared to set themselves up as the enemy of HaShem's People, and, although they were vanquished in the ensuing battle, the People of HaShem were seen by others as a people that can be challenged.
10. By attacking the People that HaShem has taken as His Own, the Ammolaykites sought to negate the lessons of HaShem's Almightyness and Supreme Mastery over the world that had been learned through the Ten Plagues of Egypt and the Splitting of the Reed Sea. For that reason, says HaShem, the People of Ammolayk — and those who would follow in their ways — shall always symbolize a challenge to the Rulership of HaShem Himself. As long as they exist, they are the personification of absolute evil, the ungodly people against whom HaShem has sworn to do battle in each generation of the future, until everyone will once again recognize HaShem as the One and Only G-d of all Mankind.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra בשלח please go to HAFTORAHS.